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SUBJECT: LATVIAN GOVERNMENT STUMBLES OVER ESTONIA

Classified By: Charge d'affaires a.i. Tamir G. Waser

¶1. (C) Summary: When the Latvian parliament rejected a resolution of support for Estonia on May 3, it soon became clear that the governing coalition had mishandled its response, either out of political pettiness, an effort to avoid violence here, a desire to maintain good relations with Moscow, or likely, a combination of the three. Whatever the reason, the government has been harshly criticized from across the political spectrum, with one foreign policy expert calling the event "the lowest point in Latvian foreign policy since the restoration of independence." Since the vote, the government has scrambled to show its support for Estonia, and in the end, probably ended up being more strident than it wanted to be. Strong as the public reaction was, it is too early to tell if this will do any lasting political damage to the coalition. End summary.

¶2. (C) In the days after the disturbances in Tallinn, the Latvian government was reacting as expected, by condemning the violence. Latvia was also quietly providing support to its neighbor, sending a water cannon to help with riot control efforts. But the GOL was clear that it would be low key about the material support it was providing to Estonia. MFA Pol Dir Klava had told Charge May 2 that Latvia "would not trumpet" its assistance, in particular not to inflame tensions in advance of May 9 Victory Day celebrations. (Note: Following the events in Tallinn, GOL officials were very nervous at the potential for spillover to May 9 events here, and laid on significant additional security from previous years. End note.)

¶3. (U) On May 3, the opposition New Era party submitted a resolution to the weekly meeting of the Saeima (parliament) offering support to the government and people of Estonia, urging respect for diplomatic norms regarding the Estonian Embassy in Moscow, condemning statements from Duma members that interfered in Estonian internal affairs, and urging EU member states and the European Parliament to make similar statements. The governing coalition opposed the resolution, arguing that it was not submitted in a timely manner and had not undergone review in committee. Although some members of the coalition defected and voted for the resolution, enough voted against, abstained, or simply did not vote to prevent the resolution from getting the 51 votes needed for adoption (it received 41). Saeima then voted 68 - 21 to send the resolution to the foreign affairs committee for further review.

¶4. (U) The following day, May 4, was the 17th anniversary of the declaration of the restoration of independence by the Latvian Supreme Soviet. At events marking the occasion, members of National Front (the group that voted for independence in 1990), including those still in parliament, were harshly critical of the actions the previous day. One National Front member told us that he "was ashamed" by the Saeima's failure to support Estonia. Others talked of how the Baltic unity that was so essential in the waning days of

the USSR had disappeared. One foreign policy expert told the DATT that the vote "the lowest point in Latvian foreign policy since the restoration of independence."

15. (U) On May 7, the Foreign Affairs committee met to review the draft declaration and coalition members issued high-minded statements on the need to follow procedure, with Chairman Andris Berzins publicly saying that the New Era draft contained spelling errors and typos that made it unacceptable. Meanwhile, New Era hammered away in the press and committee that the government (in)action was shameful. The committee adjourned without taking action.

16. (U) On May 8, an event was held in central Riga's Dome square to show support to Estonia. Based on the late-1980's Baltic Way, that formed a human chain between the three Baltic capitals, the idea was to recreate Baltic solidarity. New Era immediately jumped on the event and announced they would attend. The coalition was initially silent. PM Kalvitis, in Moscow for the world hockey championships, was called by the newspaper Diena and asked if he would attend the event. He initially said he would not because it conflicted with a cabinet meeting where the Estonian Ambassador would attend to receive the support of the government. The PM then called back to say he would attend the march with the Estonian Ambassador. The newspaper published the transcripts of both calls on the front page of its May 9 edition, creating an image of the PM being out of touch. Another Latvian language daily, usually hostile to New Era, led its May 9 edition with a picture of the Dome Square event captioned, "The people speak in the absence of the Saeima." The rural-based Latvijas Avize, a mainstay of supporters of the leading People's Party, was also harshly critical of the government and parliament's response to Estonia. None of the papers had any significant coverage of

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Kalvitis' attendance at the event or the cabinet statement of support for Estonia.

17. (C/NF) Criticism of the government also came from within. PM Kalvitis' foreign policy advisor, Peteris Ustubs (protect), said that government had completely misplayed the event. He was especially critical of the People's Party, saying that they could not see beyond their distrust of New Era and failed to recognize the public reaction of defeating the draft resolution. Ustubs, a career diplomat, is usually careful to avoid criticizing political decisions, so his strong reaction was noteworthy. MOD State Secretary Edgars Rinkevics (protect) said the Saeima's rejection of original resolution made May 3 "one of most disappointing days I've had in years."

18. (U) On May 9, the Foreign Affairs committee of the Saeima found new resolve and quickly adopted an alternative resolution, which the full Saeima adopted on May 10, with 71 votes in favor. This alternate resolution contained many of the same elements as the New Era draft, although the language was a bit softer in places and it lacked the call for other EU states to adopt similar resolutions. It did, however, specifically criticize members of the Russian Duma for "improper involvement" in the internal affairs of Estonia. Press coverage the following day used words like "finally" and "at long last" to describe the Saeima vote.

19. (C) Comment: It seems that the ruling coalition's mishandling of the situation in the parliament was motivated by combination of factors -- a deep dislike for New Era, a desire to avoid inflaming the local Russian community in advance of Victory Day commemorations and an attempt to avoid antagonizing Moscow in the run up to ratification of the Latvia - Russia border treaty. In the end, the government came out on the political short end, although May 9 did pass peacefully. Press and public reaction was unusually strong and negative, especially for Latvia. We cannot easily recall an instance, outside of moments of national tragedy, when all

three major Latvian language newspapers editorialized about the same issue with the same position on the same day. By the time the coalition got its act together, New Era was getting positive press as the defenders of the legacy of the Baltic Way and the adopted resolution ended up being probably more critical of Moscow than the government would have liked.

While New Era will likely pick up some support for its leadership on this issue, it is too early to know whether the coalition parties will suffer any lasting political damage from these events.

WASER